

Testimony of Jeannie Johanningmeier
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Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation

I am from Kingston, Pennsylvania, and I am here today to talk about my family's experience with Northwest Airlines during New Year's weekend in Detroit.

We had been visiting family in Kansas City for the holidays and had arrived in Detroit on Saturday, January 2nd, for a connecting flight to Harrisburg, PA. In a heavy snowstorm, we boarded our connecting flight at 2:30 in the afternoon, about a half-hour past the scheduled departure.

After sitting for 30 minutes at the gate, we finally pulled away and rolled toward the runway. It seemed as if we would be taking off any minute, when the pilot announced the airport was closed and we would be going back to the gate.

But we didn't head back right away. We just sat there, and it was about two hours before we learned from the pilot that the gates were filled with other planes and until they were moved, we could not get off our plane. We sat in that spot about nine more hours, until about 12:30 that night, when the plane finally began to make its way back to a gate.

During those nine hours on the plane, my husband and I were with our two boys, ages six and four. They were getting hungry, tired, bored and did not understand why they weren't going anywhere and why they couldn't get off.

Other passengers were doing their best to pass time by sleeping, reading, talking and trying to get connections on in-flight phones and/or calling worried relatives. Some people, frustrated by the lack of information, began shouting questions that were never answered. Others just swore.

At one point, I told an attendant that my children hadn't eaten since 7 A.M. She said there wasn't anything they could do because there was no food. The plane's supply of peanuts, pretzels and soda had ran out.

We would go hours without hearing a word from the crew. Every now and then the pilot would tell us he didn't know what was happening and that he was just as upset as we were.

I felt like we were prisoners, that there was nothing we could do, and that we were at the mercy of the airline. We wondered why they couldn't bring buses out to get us or at least bring us food and water.

As the night wore on, snow continued to pile up outside while the air inside became increasingly stale. Soon the cabin filled with what seemed like exhaust fumes.

Some people began to worry for their safety.

We had been trapped five, six, seven hours when it began to feel like the plane was closing in on me. I had to stand in the middle of the aisle to stretch. We took the boys on walks up and down the plane to try to keep them entertained. We played games with them, colored with them and tried to keep them calm. At times, I felt like crying or screaming, but knew that would only make matters worse.

When we finally pulled into the gate at 12:30 A.M., the pilot told us the airport would be closed until 4:00 the next day, and that we were booked on the first flight out to Harrisburg. We later learned that was untrue. Attendants told us to grab any pillows or blankets we could find and passed out Comment Cards as we left the plane.

We expected to see someone from Northwest inside the airport to answer our questions and give us an idea of what to do. But there was no one.

We grabbed an open spot next to a trashcan. My husband left me with the boys and our five carry-on bags to look for food. He found breakfast at a Burger King. Everything tasted like French toast but we were so hungry we ate it anyway.

My husband and four year old son managed to get some sleep on the floor while I walked the airport with our six year old until morning. During this time, I felt fortunate our children were old enough to understand somewhat and that we were past the diapers and formula stage.

By morning on Sunday, January 3rd, I expected at least some announcements over the intercom telling people who had been there all night what to do. As soon as employees started to arrive, lines just backed up. The confusion and congestion got worse as additional passengers began to show up for their Sunday flights.

My husband went to search for answers and information, while I waited with our six year old who had finally fallen asleep on the floor. First, the Northwest staff would say flights were on time, then delayed, then cancelled. This happened over and over. He finally learned that we really weren't booked for the first flight out - as the pilot had said.

Observing that planes were still not moving, we decided to try to rent a car. We were desperate enough to share one with another passenger in order to split the \$260.00. We left Detroit around 5:30 P.M. Sunday evening and drove through snow squalls and over icy highways for 10 hours.

Still two hours from home, we decided to spend the night in Harrisburg. We had originally flown out of Harrisburg, because it cost too much money to fly from Wilkes-Barre/Scranton International Airport.

Our nightmare wasn't over. We never could get through on the telephone to find out about our luggage and we racked up our long distance bill trying to get a refund for the

tickets we couldn't use.

I understand it was a blizzard and that you can't do anything about Mother Nature, but you would figure a place like Detroit Metropolitan Airport would be better prepared for winter weather.

And you would also expect an airline to show more concern for its customers. My husband and I each missed a day of work and our children missed a day of school. We spent \$400 on overpriced airport food, car rental and telephone calls. Our luggage, which included our children's Christmas presents from my family, did not arrive for another two days.

We were confounded to learn later that in spite of our Saturday nine hour experience, that on Sunday, Northwest repeated the same with as many as 30 aircraft and up to 11 hours.

As a layperson, I am not qualified to tell you how the law should be written, and will leave it up to the appropriate committee.